

Letter from Prison

Shūsui Kōtoku

1910

Editor's Note: Kōtoku [Denjiro] Shūsui (1871–1911) was one of the first Japanese socialists and, later, one of the founders of the Japanese anarchist movement. He began as an orthodox Marxist Social Democrat but moved away from parliamentary socialism, declaring himself an anarchist in 1905. Upon his release from jail for publishing subversive literature, he went to the United States and established contacts there with various anarchists and members of the Industrial Workers of the World. Upon his return to Japan, he became a prominent advocate of direct action. He was involved in the publication of several anarchist papers and translated the writings of European anarchists into Japanese, including Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread* (Selection 33). He was subjected to constant harassment by the Japanese authorities and was charged with high treason in 1910, along with many other Japanese anarchists, including his companion, Kanno Sugako. Kōtoku, Kanno and 9 other anarchists were executed in January 1911. Several others were sentenced to death but had their sentences commuted to life in prison. The following excerpts are from his "Letter from Prison," written to his attorneys in December 1910. The translation by Yoshiharu Hashimoto, originally published in *A Short History of the Anarchist Movement in Japan* (Tokyo: Idea Publishing, 1979), has been modified by the editor for stylistic reasons.

WHENEVER THE ANARCHIST MOVEMENT is mentioned, there are many people who understand it as assassination of a sovereign by pistol or bomb, which shows their ignorance of anarchism. You, the attorneys, know already that anarchism is a kind of philosophy similar to that of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, which taught us we must progress in accordance with the general tendency to fulfill our freedom and happiness, because that tendency is natural in human society, to be realized with mutual aid and communal life, united by morality and charity, without government compulsion as it is now.

Therefore, it is needless to say that the anarchist hates oppression, disdains bondage as well as violence, and no one else loves freedom and justice like him ..

In truth, assassins did emerge from among the anarchists, but that does not mean all anarchists without fail are assassins. Furthermore, many assassins came not only from the anarchists, but also from the state socialists, the republicans, the Minkenka, patriots and loyalists ... the number

of assassinations by anarchists is few in comparison to the other parties ... If an idea is declared terrorist due to the appearance of an assassin, there is no more violent idea than the loyal or patriotic one ... violence is usually initiated by government officials, the rich and the aristocrats, while the militant and the worker are provoked, so exploited that they are compelled to revolt with violence as a last resort...

The problem is how to make an anarchist revolution when you do not attack the sovereign with a bomb ... [our] REVOLUTION ... means a fundamental transformation of political and social institutions, not a change of rulers ... the revolution occurs spontaneously, neither individual nor party can induce it ... Therefore, we cannot plan in advance how to initiate a revolution and how to proceed with it ... Based on the presupposition ... that the institutions and hierarchy of today will not keep up with the advance and development of society and humanity ... their overthrow and the creation of new institutions will become inevitable ...

Considering this evolutionary process, we believe that after the decay of individual competition and the institution of private property, a communistic society will follow, with anarchistic libertarian institutions driving away modern state despotism; thus, we want to have such a revolution ...

Although we cannot predict under what conditions a revolution shall be realized and how it will be achieved, in any case the participants in the revolution for freedom and peace for the masses must try to limit the use of violence ... such [violent] collisions have in fact been provoked usually by the obstinate conservative elements fighting against the general tendency [of evolutionary progress] ...

The revolutionary anarchist movement, properly so-called, does not seek to induce a revolution immediately, nor is it a mutinous assault. Far from it, it includes all efforts such as the cultivation of one's understanding and knowledge, and the discipline to contribute one's service to the coming revolution. Publishing newspapers and journals, writing and distributing books and leaflets, speeches and meetings, all of these means are used to explain the reasons for and the vicissitudes of the tendency of social evolution, thereby cultivating the knowledge related to them.

In addition, organizing trade unions with various cooperatives is an advantageous vocation for us to develop the capacity of living in a commune either at the time of or in the aftermath of a revolution ...

Some may say that a movement is useless if the revolution can only come spontaneously, but that is not true. Whenever an old regime and the old institutions have reached their apogee, society has begun to decline on its own accord. Where there is no idea and knowledge of the general tendency [of social evolution], of the new institutions and organization that will replace the old, and no ability to participate, society withers away along with the old regime, without sprouting the new bud of revolution. In contrast, if we are prepared with knowledge and ability, a new bud will spring forth even though the original stock shall have died ...

There are no institutions or organizations that do not ceaselessly fluctuate and evolve, for the human being is dynamic as well as society. It is necessary to advance and to renew in accordance with the times. A small period of such advancement and renewal is called a reformation or an innovation; a big one, a revolution. In order to prevent the decay and downfall of society, I believe it is necessary to propagate new ideas and new thinking; in other words, a revolutionary movement is indispensable ...

I was surprised to hear that direct action was understood as synonymous with violent revolution and bomb throwing ... What it means is that the workers, in order to promote their own advantage, as a group, for the sake of the trade union, must act for themselves without relying on slow moving parliaments; not indirect action through the intermediary of the parliamentarian, but direct action by the workers themselves, without representatives ... Instead of asking parliament to make factory laws to improve or regulate the work place, the workers negotiate directly with the owners; if the latter refuse to negotiate, the former push on to the general strike ... Another example: a protester advocating the expropriation of food from the rich when the hungry workers lie on the street ... Then expropriation is another method of direct action ...

Just because someone is in favour of direct action does not mean that he supports everything not subjected to parliamentary procedure; nor should direct action be confused with riot, murder, robbery or even fraud because they do not go through parliament either ...

I believe it does not serve as a revolution to raise a disturbance without any cause in a peaceful country, causing vain sacrifice with destruction of property and human lives. But when the tyranny of the rich and the government reaches its zenith, and the people are driven to the verge of ruin, it is worthwhile for a future revolution to help them.

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